SIR JOHN PRINGLE, BART.

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JOHN PRINGLE, the youngest son of Sir John Pringle, the second Baronet, of Stitchel, Roxburghshire, by his wife Magdaeln, sister of Sir Gilbert Elliott, Bart., of Stobs, was born at Stitchel House on April 10th, 1707. His father was one of a large family, several of whom were men of some prominence in their day, one being Secretary at War to George I., and another a Scotch Judge who achieved a barony. Young Pringle received his early education at home, but while still very young proceeded to St. Andrews, where his uncle Francis was Professor of Greek. Some years later—in October, 1727—he entered at Edinburgh University, where he remained for one year. It was intended that he should follow a commercial career, and, with that object in view, he was sent to Amsterdam. While there he paid a visit to Leyden, and, urged by curiosity, attended a lecture on medicine delivered by the celebrated physician, Boerhaave. This made such an impression upon him that he determined to adopt a medical career, and therefore entered at the University and became a pupil of Boerhaave, and of Albinus the celebrated anatomist. Whilst at Leyden he also became intimately acquainted with Van Swieten, author of the monumental commentaries on medicine which weigh down the shelves of many of the older medical libraries, who afterwards became famous as Professor of Medicine at Vienna and Physician to the Empress Maria Theresa. On July 20th, 1730, Pringle took his doctor’s degree in medicine at Leyden, his inaugural thesis being entitled “De Marcore Senili.” This was afterwards printed. After studying for a time at Paris
he returned to Edinburgh and started practice as a physician. In March, 1734, he was appointed joint Professor of Pneumatics (metaphysics) and Moral Philosophy in the University, and delivered courses of lectures on these subjects. On the death of his colleague he became sole professor. He became acquainted with the Earl of Stair, and in 1742, when the latter took over command of the British forces in Flanders, Pringle became his private physician and was also appointed Physician to the Military Hospital in Flanders. By the terms of his commission Pringle received pay at the rate of £1 a day, and became entitled to half pay for life. During his absence from Edinburgh he continued to hold his professorship, his duties being carried on by deputy. He went through the campaign in Germany and was present at the Battle of Dettingen. Although it is probable that Pringle's position was practically that of Principal Medical Officer, it is rather surprising to read that during the battle he was in a coach with Lord Carteret. The explanation probably is that the day of battle is the surgeon's day, and there was therefore no call for the services of a physician. Apparently in those days the physician's duties lay within the walls of the hospitals, the surgeons alone doing duty on the field in addition to their work in the surgical wards of the hospitals. John Ranby, Serjeant-Surgeon to George II., was also present at Dettingen, and may have directed the medical arrangements in the field.

Pringle's patron, the Earl of Stair, retired in 1744. It is said that Pringle also wished to resign his appointment, but was not allowed to do so. Owing to the influence of the Duke of Cumberland, the Earl of Stair's successor as Commander-in-Chief, Pringle was, a few months later, promoted to be Physician-General to His Majesty's Forces in the Low Countries, and Physician to the Royal Hospitals in the same countries. Pringle now resigned his chair at Edinburgh. The outbreak of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 led to the recall to England of large numbers of troops from the Continent. In the latter part of 1745 Pringle was recalled to accompany the Duke of Cumberland in the campaign which ended in the Battle of Culloden. He then returned to the British Army on the Continent and remained there for another two years, returning to England in the autumn of 1748, when peace was made with France.

Pringle now started practice as a physician in London, but remained in the Army, being appointed a director of and physician to Chelsea Hospital, where Ranby and Cheselden were also on the staff. He also attended the annual camps for three years. In April, 1749, he became Physician-in-Ordinary to the Duke of Cumberland.
He married in April, 1752, a daughter of Dr. Oliver, of Bath, after whom the celebrated Bath Oliver biscuit takes its name. Pringle had no children, and, after only a few years of married life, was left a widower.

Pringle retired from the Army in 1758, and in the same year became Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of London. He received the Fellowship of the College on June 25th, 1763. Pringle's great reputation as a physician led to his appointment as Physician-in-Ordinary to the Queen's Household in 1761, and two years later he became Physician-in-Ordinary to the Queen. The year 1768 saw him Physician to the Dowager Princess of Wales, and in 1774 he became Physician to King George III., who had also in 1766 conferred the honour of a baronetcy upon him.

In addition to these honours from Royalty, Pringle had received recognition of his worth from his brother scientists. In 1745 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, and served on the Council of that body in 1753. In 1772 he was elected President of the Royal Society, a position which he was well fitted to adorn, not alone by his scientific attainments, but by his social powers and his friendship with the leading minds of his day in England and on the Continent. As President of the Royal Society, Pringle showed great zeal in the furtherance of scientific research. He is said to have introduced the custom of delivering an annual address on the day on which the award of the Copley Medal was made. In these he commented upon many scientific investigations carried out in his time. These discourses, six in number—dealing with such varied subjects as Captain Cook's account of his means of preventing scurvy amongst his crew, Priestley's researches on gases, Walsh's experiments on the electric eel, and Nevil Maskelyne's studies of the force of gravity on the mountain of Schehallion—were afterwards published. Pringle was also welcomed as a member of several foreign learned societies, and was in 1778 chosen, in succession to Linneus, as one of the eight foreign members of the Paris Academy of Sciences.

In 1778 Pringle's health began to fail, and in that year he resigned the Presidency of the Royal Society, being succeeded by Sir Joseph Banks. In 1781 he left London and took up his residence in Edinburgh; but, finding the climate did not suit him, he soon returned to London, where he withdrew from practice, and spent his days in social intercourse and in the entertainment of his friends at his club. On January 18th, 1782, he had an attack of apoplexy at his club, and died shortly after. He lies buried in St. James's, Piccadilly, and there is in Westminster Abbey a
monument, by Nollekens, erected to his memory at the expense of his nephew and heir, Sir James Pringle, of Stichel. Pringle had made a considerable fortune in the practice of his profession. In his will he left annuities to friends and relations amounting to £700 a year, the residue of his estate going to his nephew.

Pringle was a man of sterling integrity, honest in all his dealings, a strong friend, a charitable man, and in all respects a good man. He was intimate with most of the leaders in science and literature of his day, and numbered Priestley, Maskelyne, Franklin, and Boswell amongst his friends. His house was, as Hutchinson, one of his biographers, says, "the resort of ingenious and philosophical men," "He was held in particular esteem by eminent and learned foreigners, none of whom came to England without waiting upon him and paying him the greatest respect. He treated them in return with distinguished civility and regard." Pringle was a great student of theology and unorthodox in his opinions. He ended by becoming a Unitarian. It was probably on this account that Dr. Johnson refused to know him although Boswell was his friend.

Pringle's contributions to medical literature were of great value. One of them has always been considered a medical classic not only in England but on the Continent. This is his great work, "Observations on the Diseases of the Army," which, first published in 1752, went through several editions, the last appearing in 1810, and was translated into French, Italian, and German. An American edition was annotated by Benjamin Rush.

Not very long ago the Italian Professor Monti wrote: "Pringle was one of the earliest supporters of the doctrine of the contagium vivum as the cause of disease in his remarkable works, 'Observations on the Nature and Cure of Hospital and Jail Fevers' (London, 1750) and 'On Septic and Antiseptic Substances'; the latter contains the first researches on the subject."

His three papers on "Experiments upon Septic and Antiseptic Substances, with Remarks relating to their Use in the Theory of Medicine," were contributed to the Royal Society and were awarded the Copley Medal. They are incorporated in the later editions of his work on "Diseases of the Army." The year before his death he deposited in the library of the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, ten large folios in manuscript, entitled "Medical and Physical Observations." They include a "Treatise on Air, Climate, Diet, and Exercise." It is unfortunate that by the terms of his gift these volumes cannot be published by the College. It is probable that much valuable information concerning his military and civil practice lies buried in these manuscripts. In 1750 he pointed out,
in a letter to Dr. Mead, that jail fever is identical with typhus or
typhoid fever, and in the same year appeared his "Observations on
the Nature and Cure of Hospital and Jail Fevers" (London, 8vo).
In 1753 he contributed to the Philosophical Transactions of the
Royal Society an account of an outbreak of jail fever in Newgate.

Pringle's portrait, by Sir Joshua Reynolds, is in the possession
of the Royal Society, and a copy of it is now on the walls of
the Royal Army Medical Corps Mess, London. It is also reproduced

Sir John Pringle has found many biographers. His "Six
Discourses" contain a life written by Dr. Kippis, and biographies
of him can be found in the "Lives of British Physicians," Chambers's
"Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen," and in the
"Dictionary of National Biography." The last was written by
Dr. J. F. Payne. An excellent life also appeared in the "Pioneers
of Public Health" series in the Practitioner, and is illustrated by
a good portrait.

Sir John Pringle was unquestionably the father of modern
military hygiene, and was the founder of modern military medicine
as distinguished from military surgery. The publication of his
writings apparently gave a great impetus to military medical
literature, being followed in his own lifetime by the admirable works
of Donald Monro, Richard Brockelsby, and Francis Home. George
Cleghorn's work on the "Epidemical Diseases of Minorca" also
belongs to this period.

A study of Pringle's works proves that he was aware of many
facts in connection with military hygiene which most of us have
considered as of comparatively recent discovery.

Pringle pointed out that dysentery and fevers often appear
together in the same season. He considered scurvy amongst troops
to be largely due to exposure to damp and "corrupted" atmosphere,
and showed the advantages of removing sick troops from marshy
districts to the seashore. He was the first to point out the superior
health enjoyed by troops quartered on the higher floors of buildings
when compared to the health of those on the ground floor. He
attributed much of the sickness in the Army to the air from
marshes; rotting vegetable matter about the camps, such as the
straw upon which the men slept; the fouling of the ground of
camps with animal excreta when dysentery was prevalent; and to
overcrowding and bad ventilation in hospitals, barracks, and ships,
particularly when those suffering from "putrid distempers" lived
amongst the other troops. He recommended improvements in the
soldiers' bedding, clothes, shoes, and an increased allowance of fuel.
He strongly advocated the frequent changing of camping grounds, recommended a system of messing for soldiers instead of having their meals apart, and considered it advisable that they should be allowed a certain amount of spirits or wine. Pringle was the first to suggest the encouragement of "diversions" or recreations amongst soldiers. He discusses at some length the question of seasoned versus unseasoned soldiers, and says that a regiment which has once been much weakened by sickness will never become properly fit for service until the sick and infirm are either dead or invalided, and that those corps which have suffered least from sickness during a campaign will be most fitted to undergo the privations of a second campaign. The system of general, field, and regimental hospitals has been attributed to Pringle, but this is certainly incorrect, for they existed before his time. It appears probable, however, that many improvements in their organisation were the results of Pringle’s efforts.

The great discussion amongst Army medical officers and others of the merits and demerits of general hospitals as compared with field and regimental hospitals began with Pringle and continued until long after the end of our last war with France. Pringle writes of regimental hospitals that “they are of the greatest consequence,” and should be maintained not only in the field but in winter quarters. In Pringle’s day a winter campaign was most unusual; the armies fought during the summer and autumn, both sides retiring to quarters during the winter. Pringle says: “There is this advantage accruing from regimental hospitals, which is, that the several surgeons are best acquainted with the constitution and disposition of the patients as well as with the whole circumstances of their distempers,” and continues: “As often as it has been tried I have observed it to be more successful than that of one large and general hospital.” Pringle was practically the first to realise the important bearing of putrefactive processes on the production of disease.

Pringle’s method of treatment of dysentery may be mentioned. He says that he first bled the patient and then “vomited him” with ipecacuanha, to which he often added tartar emetic.

In conclusion, it is believed that to Pringle is due the first foreshadowing of the Geneva Convention of our own day: The Earl of Stair, when commanding the British forces in Germany, it is said at Pringle’s suggestion, proposed to the French commander, the Duc de Noailles, that the military hospitals on either side should be regarded as neutral, and mutually protected. This humane practice was observed throughout the campaign.